



Center FOR Christian Virtue

Public Policy. Engagement. Education.

To: Chair Scott Wiggam
Vice Chair Marilyn John
Ranking Member Brigid Kelly
House State and Local Government Committee

From: John Hart, Esq.
General Counsel
Center for Christian Virtue

May 18, 2022

Re: Support for House Resolution 194

Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the State and Local Government Committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to have my first time testifying in the statehouse to be in support of House Resolution 194, advocating that the US Commission on International Religious Freedom add Canada to the “Special Watch List” of countries that violate their citizens’ religious liberties. While I am here today representing the Center for Christian Virtue, please permit me to provide the perspectives from which I encourage the adoption of this resolution.

Personal

As a young boy in the early ‘60s my dad had my four brothers and I passing out a pamphlet at a July 4th town event in Long Island, New York titled “It Can Happen Here”, warning against the threat of the spread of totalitarian regimes and the correlated loss of liberties. Twenty years afterwards I had the opportunity to be one of the first collegians to travel to communist China as part of an official tour group, but with individual contact with leaders of the underground church, who experienced imprisonment and house arrest for the sharing of their faith (in spite of the publicly proclaimed Three-Self Movement supposedly permitting such actions in the guise of opening up to Western influence). Here we are over 50 years later, and I still need to share these similar concerns, with the hope that we can together make a strong statement against the erosion of liberties here and abroad, and especially with respect to our neighbor to the north.

Professional

It has been an honor to serve as the first general counsel at two of our state’s finest in higher ed, first 27 years at the University of Dayton, then ten years at Cedarville University.



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These private institutions are faith-based, mission and values driven in providing educational training and experiences to thousands of students through committed faculty, staff and administrators motivated by a particular religious charism, in the hope that its graduates will impact whatever communities their career or cultural paths lead them to engage and influence. The contributions of those who have attended these alma maters of mine are current and significant, even in these Ohio statehouse halls, and reflects the importance of having the protection of law for the expression of their faith through the academic enterprise.

In addition, my years spent on various boards of organizations like the inner city Dakota Center, the Dayton Christian Schools, and the Forge Leadership Network have shaped my perspective in seeing the need for their work among us, and the challenges presented whenever their religious liberties or the exercise thereof are sought to be restricted. Their spheres of influence suffer when those impediments are imposed, especially by unaccountable governmental authority, yet their communities flourish when their rights are given full recognition.

Philosophical

Our country's founding documents have prioritized the importance of the self-evident truths of life, liberty and happiness being available to all men, and codified the supremacy of religious liberty by placing it, as my constitutional law professor would state, "first among the First," as in our First Amendment rights. Our state Constitution places a similar value on religion and its expression in our ordered society. Religion is the singular right that, of all the protected classes, is the one that is chosen, not merely created, and as such warrants high protection for each citizen. That freedom is one which those in other countries desire and gravitate to, and when allowed, willingly incorporate some form of this liberty into their own statutes and regulations.

Practically speaking, however, we have too often heard or seen increasingly frequent accounts of where this type of right has been ignored, abused, removed, or even made the basis of legally punitive actions. While the examples have ranged from my observed and still ongoing persecution from thousands of miles away in China to just hundreds of miles away in Canada, sadly we have observed the minimizing or erosion of such liberties in our own country. From prior censorship of sermons, unduly burdensome restrictions on faith-based ministries and charitable activities, and the increasing hostility to faith in the public square, there are too many incidents to ignore.



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Instead, we today in this resolution have an opportunity to stand strong for the protection and preservation of liberties foundational to our freedoms, and to promote this principle to our neighbors to the north and even around the world.

Thank you.

The Center for Christian Virtue (CCV) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that endeavors to create an Ohio where God's blessings of life, family, and religious freedom are treasured, respected, and protected.

www.ccv.org -- (513) 733-5775